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**THE BASIS OF  
SOVIET  
PHILOSOPHY**



by  
**JOHN LEWIS Ph.D.**  
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## THE BASIS OF SOVIET PHILOSOPHY

by

John Lewis

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## THE BASIS of SOVIET PHILOSOPHY

by JOHN LEWIS, Ph.D.

PHILOSOPHY is in the air, but most of it to-day is a philosophy of scepticism and defeatism, of doubt and confusion. Whether on the Brains Trust, or in the broadcast debates on "The Challenge of our Time," or in the popular press, to which Dr. Joad contributes not a little of his wisdom, we hear

"great argument  
About it and about, but evermore  
Come out by that same door wherein we went."

*The Listener* says the accepted standards of society are in dissolution, and "Critic" of the *New Statesman* confesses that there is to-day "no confident philosophy for the human race."

This is a more serious situation than most people suppose. As we think we live. Such disintegration in the sphere of belief does but express the fact that we are in a period of social decay. As Lenin put it: "The old world is senile, paralytic, rotting." The danger of this prevalent confusion has been clearly seen by one considerable philosopher of our time. Whitehead says: "Mankind can flourish in the lower stages of life with merely barbarian flashes of thought. But when civilisation culminates, the absence of a co-ordinating philosophy of life, spread through the community, spells decadence, boredom and the slackening of effort."<sup>1</sup>

At a recent conference organised by the Institute of Sociology, Professor Hodges spoke of this "conflict of doctrines with one another and the inability of any of them to give some sense to the brute facts of life." As he rightly concludes, this can only have the effect of creating in the public a mood of scepticism and cynicism. When men have no central point around which beliefs and habits can be focussed and to which efforts can be related, they find themselves at a loss to discover a meaning in life, and they are carried along passively in the flow of events instead of being centres of decision and purposeful action.

1. Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas*

In the middle ages men had such a co-ordinating philosophy—"They knew (or thought they knew) what kind of a place the world is, what kind of a being man is and where he comes into the scheme of things."<sup>1</sup> In the twentieth century men stand bewildered. But not everywhere. In his address to the Academy of Sciences of the U.S.S.R. on the occasion of its Jubilee, Professor Mitin, speaking of the growth of philosophical culture in the Soviet Union during the past twenty-five years, said :

"The mastery of dialectical materialism gives people a straightforward, clear-cut world outlook, enables them to understand the laws underlying historical events, arms them with a theoretical weapon for practical use."

Dialectical materialism enables us to understand that in the final analysis historical events are not determined by the will of 'conquerors and oppressors' of states and nations, but that the fate of nations is in the hands of the nations themselves."

We are all familiar with the cultural and economic achievements of the Soviet Union, but we do not always realise that the reorganisation of society which we see proceeding has behind it a philosophy of life, a theory of social evolution, a tremendous and widespread conviction of the objective truth of the Soviet philosophy.

That is why there is an absence of scepticism, of these paralysing and defeatist theories, of illusions and escapist phantasies, of useless longing for the past. Nor is the future at all mysterious, uncertain or dreadful to the Soviet man. There is not a word of fear, nor appeal to chance, nor to providence, nor vain remonstrance with nature. He has discovered the law of social development and knows what must come. The thread of history is in his hand.

### RUSSIA HAS A PHILOSOPHY

"Marx taught the working class to know itself, to be conscious of itself and to put science in the place of dreams."

The Russian people have learnt that lesson and put it into practice. After many years of struggle and endurance, after many setbacks, the hope and confidence of the Soviet citizen to-day is a fact that no hostile propaganda can conceal. For many years now travellers have brought home a surprising picture of assured, busy, hopeful folk, absorbed in their tasks, superbly self-confident,

1. Prof H. A. Hodges in *Synthesis in Education*

with firm ground under their feet, for they know their existence is secure and that all ways of development are open to them. J. B. Priestley, whose shrewd judgment was little likely to be at fault, felt this optimism, and another observer, Foster Anderson, not the sort of man to be at all favourable to the Socialist idea, says of an all-night discussion with a group of Moscow students :

"The atmosphere of that small group of men and women with whom I mixed had a quality of the search for truth and a belief in the human mind to grasp it which I have not met in any other university."<sup>1</sup>

For Plato the only hope for human social happiness lay in the possibility that Kings might become philosophers, or philosophers Kings. There are no Kings in Russia, but in that land where "every kitchen maid must learn to rule the country" there is a sovereign people and they are all philosophers !

The philosophy of Karl Marx is of course scientific, not speculative or metaphysical in the common meaning of that term. Just as we can all develop the habit of thinking scientifically about the mechanics of a motor-car, about bacteria and disease, or the working of the body, so is it possible for plain men to see the scientific pattern of economics and social development. Soviet philosophy is in this sense a *scientific* philosophy ; therefore it is not only a new philosophy but a new *kind* of philosophy, and essentially a philosophy of action. It is not regarded as a mere exercise of the mind among abstractions ; on the contrary, it is the awareness of the concrete factors of change and of men's part in that change. It is the interpretation of unfolding events and a guide to action. Stalin speaks of "the tremendous organizing, mobilizing and transforming value of new ideas, new theories." They arise, he says, "because they are necessary to society, because it is *impossible* to carry out the urgent tasks of development of the material life of society without their organizing, mobilizing and transforming action."<sup>2</sup> That is why philosophy is taught in every technical institute and university in the Soviet Union ; that is why it is an essential part of the curriculum of the Red Army and why

1. Foster Anderson, *Borderline Russia*

2. Stalin, *Dialectical and Historical Materialism*

it is mastered by hundreds of thousands of technicians, doctors, teachers and artists. Professor Mitin points out that in contrast to the exceedingly small group of people who occupied themselves with philosophy before the revolution and the very small editions of philosophical works then published, to-day the Soviet Union has become a country of high philosophical culture and its peoples have become the lawful heirs of the whole heritage of ancient and modern philosophy. The enormous circulation of the classics of philosophy is some indication of this. Between 1917 and 1938 over 200,000 copies of the Works of Hegel have been distributed, 250,000 copies of Voltaire, 65,000 copies of Spinoza, 48,000 copies of Einstein. During this period they have published, too, the works of Aristotle, Lucretius, Democritus, Giordano Bruno, Hobbes, Descartes, Leibnitz, Locke, Condillac, Diderot and others. A recent Soviet work of considerable importance is Alexandrov's *History of Philosophy*, shortly to be translated into English. Soviet philosophy is based upon the works of Marx and Engels, and of Lenin and Stalin, who applied and developed their theories. The copies of their works circulated run into hundreds of millions.

## TWO KINDS OF MATERIALISM

It has sometimes been supposed that the world view of Soviet Russia is anything but a philosophy or at any rate is little more than a discredited materialism. Ignorant of the philosophical tradition of the west and limited by nineteenth century ideas, the Russians are often held to be mere philistines in metaphysics.

This of course reveals complete ignorance. In the first place Marx and Engels were trained philosophers whose own position was a development rather than a wholesale repudiation of the philosophy of their time. Engels said "Those who abuse philosophy most are slaves to precisely the worst vulgarised relics of the worst philosophers." And elsewhere he speaks of the importance of "learning to assimilate the results of the development of philosophy during the past two and a half thousand

years." Marx was in his formative years a member of that brilliant group of immediate followers of Hegel known as The Young Hegelians, and his early writings and all the works of his friend Engels, bear witness to his complete familiarity with the philosophical tradition. Lenin too in his *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* shows a naturally philosophical mind, and Stalin is the author of *Dialectical and Historical Materialism*. Lenin's philosophical reading was systematic and unusually efficient, the subject with which he specifically dealt being that irrationalism and doubt as to the ability of science to reach the real world, which since he wrote has been much popularised by Eddington and other philosophical sceptics.

It speedily becomes clear from a study of Marx and Engels that Soviet Philosophy is far from being a form of narrow nineteenth century materialism. This is indeed emphatically, clearly and frequently repudiated, beginning with Marx's earliest philosophical writings.

Mechanistic materialism reduces mind to "epiphenomena," a sort of glow or halo, the function of which is to light up purely physical events which occur in the brain.

Soviet philosophy, on the other hand, basing itself on Engels here, holds that *life is a reality*, a special kind of behaviour of matter when organised in plants and animals. It appears at a moment in the evolution of the planet, not from outside but as a result of the unique conditions which make it possible. *Mind too is a reality*, and of course morals and all other human values. Dependent upon a material basis, as a picture is composed of material pigments, and as music is dependent upon the vibrations of reeds, strings and the air, it is none the less a unique reality—the whole is greater than its parts, and the stream rises higher than its source.

## MONISM

Soviet philosophy is nevertheless materialistic in the sense that it believes that there is only one world to know, that in which we live and which we come to know through the senses, a world which existed prior to us

and which is of course outside our minds. This real world includes not only the matter of the physical scientist, but living and thinking organisms, all the creations of the human spirit, all that Stalin calls "the spiritual life of men." The universe, then, is our datum. It is given, it exists, it is the everyday world of common sense and common experience.

It is not necessary for spirit to have a distinct existence from matter for matter to have spiritual qualities. Marx's great predecessors, Spinoza and Hegel knew splendidly how to laugh at those who saw two different substances in matter and spirit.

The most outstanding philosophical systems have always been *monistic*. They have accepted the substantial unity of nature and spirit. According to monism there is nothing outside the cosmic system, nothing supernatural. Physical energy, life and mind are modes of behaviour of one self-existing substance, which needs no external creator.

But whereas for Hegel matter and history were the manifestation of mind, matter and mind being "integral components of one process of self-revelation," for Marx ideas obviously cannot exist except in somebody's head, therefore "Being precedes consciousness." "For Hegel," he says, "the thought process . . . is the creator of the real; and for him the real is only the outward manifestation of the idea. In my view, on the other hand, the idea is nothing other than the material when it has been transposed inside the human head."<sup>1</sup>

### WHAT IS MATTER?

For the mechanistic materialist matter is dead and immutable. The atoms of which everything is composed are conceived as little solid objects mechanically interacting as billiard balls impinge on one another, or as the parts of a machine interlock and interconnect. Marxism thinks of matter very differently. In the first place the

world does not consist of fully-fashioned objects, rather is it "a complex of processes in which things . . . go through an uninterrupted change of coming into being and passing away, in which, in spite of all seeming accidents and all temporary retrogression, a progressive development asserts itself in the end."<sup>1</sup> As Stalin puts it in his short essay on *Dialectical and Historical Materialism*—a model of clear and forceful presentation—"nature is not a state of rest and immobility, stagnation and immutability, but a state of continuous movement and change, of continuous renewal and development, where something is always arising and developing, and something always disintegrating and dying away." That is why dialectical materialism is not at all disturbed at these modern theories of matter which are supposed to have refined matter away to something almost if not quite spiritual. Thirty-five years ago Lenin dealt with this question, and pointed out that it was not the *solidity* that made matter what it was, but simply the fact of its being *objective reality*, existing outside our consciousness. The fact that matter becomes more tenuous, is reduced to electricity, does not make it mental, in no way diminishes the difference between the material and the mental. Energy and radiation obviously belong as much to the physical world as tables and chairs.

But matter which is never at rest, never the same for two successive moments (something more like a flame than a stone, as Dr. Waddington puts it) is quite capable by the laws of its own motion of building itself up into new and complex wholes, manifesting new and unexpected properties. If matter were dead and unchanging this would be difficult to conceive without the intervention of some supernatural force from outside. Science has now firmly established the self-sufficiency of the natural order. Just as the chemist does not require a miraculous impulse to unite elements into compounds of great complexity, because Nature does it herself, so Nature can and has made proteins and living protoplasm without miracle either. And just as the biologist has learnt to dispense with a vital force so the psychologist and physio-

1. Marx, *Capital* (preface to Second Edition)

1. Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach*

logist have learnt to do without the soul as a *separate thing* moving parallel to the physical body and interacting with it. We now consider mind as the *function* of the human brain, as "thinking," not as pure "thought."

Thus Dialectical Materialism escapes the absurdities of that dualism, the belief in two utterly different and yet interacting things, matter and mind, which philosophy has always sought to escape. The universe is one, that is to say it is *monistic*, and it is changing and developing. It is material, but matter at a certain stage of complexity can live, and, at a higher stage still, when organised in the human brain, it can think.

### MATERIALISM AND THE CITIZEN

Now let us pause to ask ourselves what all this means to the Soviet citizen. Its importance for him is not that it is from the speculative point of view the truest interpretation of the universe. The point is that from a practical point of view he escapes every vestige of that superstition which must dog the footsteps of those who believe that vital forces, supernatural agencies, pure spirit, can act upon matter. Just as primitive man made no progress in science and medicine until he banished magic and the idea of supernatural intervention, so modern man has still to get rid of supernatural or irrational notions of the source of evil, of those happenings like economic crises which he cannot yet understand, of war. Supernaturalism is the foe of a confident investigation of natural causes. The Soviet man is confident that the world is controlled by natural law alone and that that nature is not inscrutable to the human mind.

But even more important, he does not believe that the world is unchangeable, that what has been must always be, that social systems are eternal and human nature unalterable. He believes that more light and truth are continually breaking out, that matter, life and man are constantly revealing unexpected possibilities, that man himself when he creates for himself a new social structure, can become a new creature. He thus frees himself from the paralysing, static philosophies of our day, which constantly seek to persuade us that nothing ever really changes.

One thing needs to be added. In Russia this is no longer a faith and a hope. It is a certainty. They *have* found it possible to know the laws of the material world and to control it. They *have* changed their world, their social system—and themselves.

### THEORY AND PRACTICE

An interesting feature of Soviet Philosophy arises from the above considerations. If we grasp resolutely the notion of man using his intelligence to understand and control the world so that "Ideas" do not exist in their own right as Truths, Principles, Ideals "out there," so to speak, above the material world; if we remember that ideas occur nowhere but in people's brains, and in relation to the situation they are dealing with, then we shall begin to see why the philosophical enemy of Dialectical Materialism is what is called Abstract Thinking.

What then is *Concrete Thinking*? In the first place this means that what you know about the material world, as comprised in your scientific conceptions of it, is strictly limited by the state of your technical and scientific development, by the actual course of man's investigations and experiments and achievements up to date. Present knowledge stands at the end of a long series of historic steps. Each step was strictly limited by its own level of technical development, and by the extent to which it could change things and make things. Our own knowledge is similarly limited.

Our first steps in knowledge were strictly related to our primitive needs and our first blundering attempts to satisfy them—the making of flint implements, weaving and so on. Here our knowledge reflected our crude bunglings with stones and fibres, but, imperfect though it was, it paved the way for better knowledge—our very flint knives helped us to cut and carve and in so doing learn more about the stuff we worked on. Wrestling with imperfect tools, we come to make better ones.

Thus all ideas are derived from action, and action is always a response to human need—how to get food, how to make a fire, how to protect the body from cold, and so on.

Thus arises the first idea of the wheel or lever, for instance. Such new ideas and *improved* action have remarkable effects; they release new forces, reveal new qualities in things, bring into our experience new substances either not known at all or hitherto ignored as unimportant (e.g., wood as a workable material, iron-ore). Active work with this wealth of new things and new technique soon revolutionises the very ideas with which we started our successful operations. Action once again calls for a re-casting of our ideas. Thus every cause was once an effect, and every effect becomes in turn a cause.

### WHAT DO WE MEAN BY DIALECTICS?

Now this is what is meant by *dialectics*. It is a to and fro process between idea and action, theory and thing; there are no ideas that do not arise from action and in turn lead to action, there is no action that does not change ideas. Our first glimpse of dialectics was our conception of a changing, fluid, developing material world, rather than of an unchangeable, static one. Now we see the fuller meaning of dialectics as the law of man's own development, of the growth of knowledge, of civilisation, of social change.

Ideas then are closely tied to the particular stage we are at, to our technique, to the things and objects we happen to know about. Ideas are *particular* concepts or theories or hypotheses with which we work, which have themselves gradually evolved with our changing practice. Such ideas are *true*, because they are the very knowledge with which we handle the world, and there is a progressive approximation to absolute truth as our knowledge increases and our control of the world becomes more and more complete. But for the same reason our ideas are *limited* by our practice, by our interests and needs, by the limited scope of our achievements. All such truth is relative.

This, then is a very different materialism from one which merely allows the external world to reflect itself

in our minds. For the Marxist there is no merely contemplative or reflective knowledge and no universe that is not understood in relation to how it affects us and we affect it, in relation to our *dealings with it*.

Thus on the human level all thinking, unless it is foolish thinking, changes and does not merely interpret or try to understand the world. There is no room for purely speculative ideas, for fancy theories, for the formulation of systems of pure ideas derived from abstract thinking. All such misuse of intellect can only distract us from our real task and will most seriously mislead us if we ever act as though ideas of this sort could possibly be true.

### WHAT IS IDEALISM?

The philosophy which instead of regarding ideas as the measure of our achievement, the eye of our practice, treats them as truths arrived at by the operations of pure thinking, is known as "*Idealism*." The word has nothing to do with living for noble ends. There is plenty of that sort of idealism in Russia. It means considering mind apart from the brain, apart from the problem-solving which brains do for their bodies. It means separating theories and systems of ideas from daily practice, from grappling with the world of objects. It goes on to mean a belief in two parallel worlds; the one of dead matter, the other of pure spirit, of values, of ideals, of morals. This is damaging to the everyday world, which is stripped of its meaning and purpose and its active achieving minds, which are really part of it. But it also does great harm by treating as ultimate realities ideas in themselves. An idea torn away from its brain, its relation to a particular situation, is an illusion, an abstraction, and idealists tend to live among such illusions. The final stage of idealism as a philosophy is to make "*pure idea*" the spiritual source from which the whole material universe is created and which breathes into it its life and intelligence, its values and purpose. This is to turn reality completely upside down since it is clear

that thinking arises in the course of evolution within the real world and is about that world. The idealist conception can only lead men into every kind of muddle, confusion and illusion, since it will always regard this world of pure ideas as the effective source of action and the ultimate reality. It will try to find these truths by pure reason. It will attribute eternal truth to them. It will try to realise them on earth, regardless of circumstances. It will preach them, set them up as codes of rigid conduct. And all the time ideas and theories should be merely reflecting and guiding our practice and changing with it. "There is no more fatal enemy," says Bradley, "than theories which are not also facts."

## DIALECTICS AND PRACTICAL POLITICS

In Russia the complete rejection of idealism, the constant revision of theories and ideas to keep pace with changing facts, the clear conception that every effective idea must arise out of a particular situation and indicate a course of action, have kept socialist theory flexible and developing. This has prevented the petrification of policies and principles, it has prepared people for the swift changes of policy and plan demanded by the very success of earlier plans. In a word it has made thinking effective. Of course, as we have explained, Soviet philosophy is not the academic pursuit of an *élite*. It is the method of thinking of a whole community as well as of all the leading forces in politics and administration from the Ministers of State to factory managers, trade union leaders and chairmen of collective farms. What it has actually meant in practice can only be fully understood on the basis of a detailed knowledge of what has happened in Russia during the last twenty-five years. To consider briefly one example—the development of Collective Farms. At the beginning of the revolution the peasants seized the land, by a whole series of changes each arising out of the other, each requiring a sharp change in policy, the Collective Farm at last comes into being.

Those who failed to see how people and institutions industry and farming, were changing and interacting all the time, who failed to discover in Stalin's words, what was "arising and developing, what was "disintegrating and dying away," made the most shocking mistakes in policy. They assumed that the peasant would always be individualistic, avaricious, lazy, unintelligent, his interests opposed to those of the town worker, because that was what he had been like in the early days of the revolution. Instead the very conditions brought into existence by the revolution began to change the peasant and as new policies and new conditions were thus made possible, still further changes occurred. The final result is the collective farmer of to-day, who is a very different man from the peasant of yesterday.

## DIALECTICS ON THE BATTLEFIELD

An enormously important application of dialectical thinking was seen in the development of tactics and strategy during the war to keep pace with the development of the campaign through its successive phases. The success of each special military method led to its negation, for it was superseded by another method as required by the very situation brought into existence by its success. This was not all. The commanders had to remember that the psychology of their men, and of their officers, was changing under the impact of experience—hardening, maturing, becoming more self-confident. And the equally rapid and quite different changes in the psychology of their enemies had to be allowed for too. Then for the civilian administrators there were important changes in industry, transport, administration and civilian morale, making sharp changes in policy necessary, or new achievements possible. There is no doubt that long practice in dialectical thinking stood Soviet Russia in good stead during the testing years of the war.

## DIALECTICS AND DOGMA

Now dialectics can give no detailed picture of what is likely to happen in the future. There is no formula which tells you just what will occur and just what to do. In every case it is the observation and evaluation of the concrete details of the actual situation that alone gives you the clue to the next move. There is no magic about this method of thinking. It will surprise some people to find how free from utopianism, from vague theorising and from cast-iron dogma, Soviet thinking is.

Can it really be as concrete and realistic as that? It had to be. There would have been no success in carrying through the revolution in the teeth of the kind of difficulties they were up against if iron dogmas had prevailed. Anyone who thinks that it is even conceivable shows himself thereby to be an idealist, a person who imagines that pure ideas, or ideals, or dogmas conceived by the imagination or the conscience, or the intellect, can be imposed on life. This has often been the method of religion, using the methods of authority, propaganda, persuasion and exhortation. It does not succeed unless these religious ideas themselves reflect actual social needs. Only those ideas are effective which arise out of the concrete situation, which reflect the demand of the changed conditions for a new organisation of society, which reflect the needs of large sections of the community, placed in some desperate situation which insists on their adopting such new and revolutionary ideas. It is ideas of this kind, not utopian dreams and fanatically held dogmas, that have guided Soviet policy in the building of their new civilisation.

## HISTORY IN THE MAKING

Soviet philosophy is a philosophy of history. In the past even while men have made their own history they have never clearly seen what they were doing, nor do most of us to-day. But Russia is consciously making its own history, and world history too. Not, of course, "according to their own fancy or the promptings of their

imagination. Every new generation encounters definite conditions already existing, ready made, when that generation was born. And if great people are worth anything at all, it is only to the extent that they correctly understand these conditions and know how to alter them. If they fail to understand these conditions and try to change them according to their own fancies, they will put themselves in a quixotic position. So you will see that precisely according to Marx, people must *not* be contrasted to conditions. It is people who make history, but they make it only to the extent that they correctly understand the conditions they found ready-made and to the extent that they know how to change these conditions." <sup>1</sup>

Let us glance at some examples of this. The major crises of history appear to be due to the social structure of society becoming inadequate to developing conditions—the kind of inadequacy seen when the capacity of a new economy to produce is hampered by the political and social set-up in which it functions. When the autocratic monarchy and semi-feudal society of England compelled the merchants of the City to overthrow the Stuarts, the object was at bottom an economic one. The new and growing forms of business life requiring parliamentary control over taxation and the guarantee of full legal rights for property. It was economic development that set up the pressure on institutions through a new business class ever growing stronger and more confident and at the same time ever more checked and crippled in their struggle for success by irresponsible government.

Socialism gets onto the agenda only when the very property system which encouraged capitalism in its early days now prevents the raising of the general standard of living and vexes life with its crises and economic wars for markets. At this stage the working class seizes power just as the bourgeoisie before them. Ideas of equal opportunity and better times which were once utopian dreams are now brought within range of practicability.

<sup>1</sup> Stalin, *Interview with Emil Ludwig*

The new creative ideas, which now become effectual, are those which are identified with the living and growing social forces of the workers' movement.

This philosophy of history, which they learnt from Marx and Lenin, became the working philosophy of the Bolsheviks. In the fierce political struggles of the first eighteen years of the century, culminating in the revolution, it was their guiding theory—and it worked. That is why the Russians to-day are the only nation with a philosophy of history, with a sense of destiny and with confidence in the future.

This theory (which is outlined succinctly in Stalin's *Dialectical and Historical Materialism*) is sometimes supposed to be deterministic, as though impersonal forces moved irresistibly to a predestined end and men were merely puppets pulled by economic forces. This is a complete misunderstanding of the theory. There is no more determinism about it than there is about a medical decision to submit a patient to a *necessary* operation, or scientists working out the *necessary* steps to generate electricity or release atomic energy. Granted capitalism with its factories, its private ownership, its wage system and the dominating principle of working for profit and *reinvesting that profit*, then a situation is bound to arise in which the working class will need to reconstruct the whole system—or perish. But human understanding and decision, human organisation and courage are indispensable for such a change. The driving force of history is not economics but *men*—men in a situation of desperate need and opening opportunity. Nor is it in the least true that only selfish, economic motives drive people in such circumstances. On the contrary the developed economic situation makes it possible for the first time in history for men to turn their dreams into deeds. All the hitherto frustrated idealism of men now pours into the struggle for a new world. The story of the Russian Revolution is full of idealism and heroism, of sacrifice to the uttermost, of noble purpose. But it is not the idealism of Don Quixote, a mere dream of beautiful deeds wrecked hopelessly against intractable reality.

## THE LAWS OF CHANGE

The field of history is but an example of the laws of evolutionary development and material change which are fundamental to Marxism. But we shall see them operating in whatever field we examine and they will be found by all who seek objectively and approach their material scientifically. For these are the general laws of all change and are as true in history as in chemistry, in economics as in biology.

If we generalise from what we actually find in all such fields we shall be able to add to the notion of eternal process the further idea of evolutionary advance by leaps, and as the effective cause of such leaps the appearance within every whole, be it an organism or an atom, a collective farm or a factory, a forest or an economic system, of *opposing or contrasting aspects*, or what Hegel called *contradictions*. These are not logical contradictions, but concrete opposite tendencies, such as the positive and negative electric charges in an atom; the constant breaking down of its substance by oxidation and the utilising of the released energy to build up its own substance again found in every organism; such as the contradictions of capitalism. It was a clear realisation of the last that gave to Marxism its power to foretell the end of capitalism and to point the way to Socialism. Marx saw for instance the contradiction between productive capacity, driven by the re-investment of profits to indefinite expansion, and the final market, which is incapable of absorbing that output; this of course is rooted in the deeper contradiction of owner and wage-earner with their antagonistic interests.

Now such contradictions are not conditions of disequilibrium, so that mechanically the pendulum swings back, or the water returns to its level. They appear, grow in intensity, and reach a critical condition which demands a reorganisation of society—actually in this case the ending of the private ownership of capital, of the appropriation of profits by owners, of the subsistence wage, that is of the whole relationship of employer and

employed as we find it under capitalism. Such change can only be effected when the existing system has reached and passed the limits of its development. "Ripeness is all."

The Bolsheviks saw in the tottering Czarist empire the weakest link in the capitalist system, already in decay. They saw the hopeless contradictions of that system. They saw within that empire the working class as a social force growing daily in strength and unity and capable of revolutionary action. At the right moment they assumed the leadership of that class and the old order fell.

When this happened another law of change was demonstrated. The complete elimination of exploitation, the rise to effective *power* of a whole class previously conditioned to servility, does not merely alter the *economic* structure. Everything changes, the *whole* is different and its parts are different too—for they behave differently and perform new functions, as when notes are re-arranged into a new tune, words into a new sentence, elements into a new compound. In Russia to-day *people are different*, more independent, more self-confident, less concerned with money, contemptuous of the profiteering motive. This was well brought out when Wendell Willkie visited the Soviet Union during the war and engaged in a long dispute with the superintendent of production in a factory employing 30,000 men. Willkie wanted to know why he did not "invest his savings in something that would give a good return." The production manager replied that he didn't believe in "getting a return" on capital. Willkie then asked "Well, what does cause you to work so hard?" When the man tried again to explain that he enjoyed doing a first-rate piece of constructive work, to Willkie it was only a "deluge of Marxian economic and social philosophy." For the American it could only be money that made people work—and he was a very decent American. There was no possibility of a mutual understanding between these two men—they belonged to two different moral worlds.

## TRANSFORMING OLD VALUES

It must not be imagined, however, that revolutionary change merely wipes out the past. What is overcome is neither destroyed nor rejected; it is mastered and re-moulded. It is carried forward into the cultural heritage, not as a fixed deposit of eternal truth, not as a mere persistence of old institutions, but in a new form. All cultural values, moral principles and scientific truths suffer a sea-change as history unfolds. They are not lost—unless they are not allowed to change. That is why there is particularly keen appreciation of the classics in literature, art and philosophy in Russia. The Soviet citizen has a great sense of history. As his historical films and novels show, he does not reject Peter and Ivan as reactionary despots. He can see how in their own day for all their faults they carried social development forward. For the same reason the crude philistinism that held the conversion of Russia to Christianity to be the mere spread of superstition, has been rejected without qualification. Western observers go ridiculously wrong when they fail to notice this law of change. For example, they regard an interest in and understanding of Peter the Great as simply a pendulum swing back to crude nationalism. This is an example of undialectical thinking which does seriously believe that one can return to the past, that history moves in cycles. In truth, history moves in a spiral. There is a repetition of certain features, but on a higher level.

## FREEDOM

An excellent example of this principle is seen in the new meaning of freedom in Soviet society. To the Western mind there has been a simple negation of all the freedoms it values. We forget, of course, that historically these were the freedoms of the new business class, won in the teeth of monarchist and feudal despotism, a class which took good care to see that the peasants and workers had no more of it than was good for them, and good for private property. In Russia these freedoms have been destroyed—freedom of property, of

the capitalist monopoly press, of capitalist political parties, existing to impose sectional interests on the community, freedom to profiteer, to buy cheap and sell dear, to exploit, to invest, "private enterprise," and all the rest of it. They have been swept out of existence because, in developed monopoly capitalism, these freedoms extinguished the freedom of practically everybody (an excellent example of the dialectical process whereby a thing turns into its opposite). The undialectical Liberal clings to the once progressive liberties of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, although to-day they are completely illiberal, and honestly thinks he is dying in the last ditch for liberty. But it is a complete mistake to suppose that their denial is the end of liberty. It is the first real achievement of liberty and its permanent guarantee. For the first time here is liberty not for a class but for everyone, the wider liberties of a classless society, in which, as capitalism and class are firmly denied, the possibility of enjoying the widest opportunities is won for all. Only under Socialism are men free to work, free to appropriate the fruits of their labours, free to utilise the productive forces to capacity, free to avail themselves and their children of equal opportunity, free for leisure and culture. Only under Socialism are men free to run their own communally-owned press, national and local newspapers, factory and farm newspapers, trade union professional and cultural journals, without the financial prohibitions and restrictions on such freedom which so seriously limit journalistic freedom in our commercial world.

It is sometimes said that economic freedom is attained at the cost of political freedom. It is of course the indispensable condition of it, and at the same time itself depends on the political freedom of the workers. Once again we need philosophy to help us. Our politics belong to our class-society and bring about the political deadlock of hopelessly antagonistic class interests—the stultification of progress. The politics of capitalism is the art of preventing the people getting things done in their own interests. It is social obstruction and sabotage on

the one hand and the struggle against it on the other. Only the ending of the freedom of vested interests to use their wealth and power to organise political sabotage really gives the people for the first time the freedom to get on with the job of organising their social life in their own interests. It is that freedom which Soviet Russia enjoys *because of its political suppression* of capitalist obstruction.

No one in the Soviet Union wants a return to the political arena in which purely selfish sectional interests are given the opportunity to get a strangle-hold on the community again. Peasants don't want a landlord party with the programme of confiscating the collective farms and handing them back to an *émigré* aristocracy. Workers don't want a party aiming to hand the factories back to private ownership, and themselves to wage slavery. In their new world these things have been abolished like human sacrifice, witch doctors, the Divine Right of Kings, education by ecclesiastics, duelling, the ceremonial burning of widows and other anachronisms. The destruction of these things has been the very victory that has given them the freedom they now enjoy, and to suggest the possibility of throwing it away would be like asking people just saved from a raging fire to re-enter the burning building.

If instead of weaving depressing pictures of a totalitarian society the critics would have a good look at Soviet reality they would see what Hegel and Marx called "the negation of the negation" as a concrete fact. Freedom destroyed, and its destruction negated in a new birth of freedom. "To make the individual sacred we must destroy the social order which crucifies him" We sentimentalise over the individual, his potentialities, his sacred person, his freedom, and then permit him to be destroyed by the anarchy of our economic system, thwarted and corrupted by commercialism, or exploited and degraded by our colonial system with its colour bar, its poverty and disease.

The Russians, meanwhile, are busy establishing the concrete social and material conditions for giving every individual a real chance. The one thing they are interested in is the welfare of the individual. The social organisation which some of us are afraid of exists to secure for each individual economic security, health, education, and the development of whatever special aptitudes he may have. Barbusse says : "I am frequently asked whether personality is submerged in Russia ; this is not so, personality is exalted because everyone has before him opportunities which are forbidden to the exploited who live in the lands of masters and slaves. Everybody here is bubbling over with individuality, burning with it. Nothing has struck me more forcibly than this more intense individuality of the people of the Soviet State."

The Russians have transcended the narrowly selfish aims of competitive capitalist individualism, which in religion sought the personal felicity of the individual soul hereafter, and as far as this world was concerned, the fattest individual bank balance, and have revived the ideal of fellowship, of communion, so splendidly set forth in the New Testament, but never put into practice by the Church. At the same time they have revived the *organic* conception of mediaeval society, as opposed to the mechanical atomism of protestantism. There are no great philosophers or theologians or ethical teachers who have failed to see that the individual only finds his life by losing it, only gets his richness in society ; that isolated he shrivels into nothingness.

### ETHICS

If the conception of freedom is uplifted and for the first time realised in practice, ethics too are both transformed and made possible in a Soviet Society that repudiates flatly the exploitation of one class or sex or nation by another. The State prohibits living on the labour of others by rent or dividends, it therefore enjoins the universal obligation to work, placing in the Constitution the principle first enunciated by St. Paul :

"He that will not work, neither shall he eat," which no Christian state has ever even tried to establish. It sets up as a social aim service, not acquisition, it condemns the practice of buying cheap and selling dear as the way to prosperity, and advocates instead the principle of "each for all and all for each." It offers to all an equal chance of living to the full, and enjoins that "every child must be a first-class passenger."

It would be quite contrary to Marxist philosophy if these ideals were merely advocated as abstract principles. On the contrary, Soviet society advocates them because for the first time in history they are capable of realisation, because the development of capitalism has now made abundance possible and the coming of socialism bestows that abundance upon all. To preach such ideals in separation from the prerequisite conditions has always been futile and that has been the explanation of the ineffectual character of Christian ethics and socialist utopianism. Soviet Communism does not merely *aim at* these ideals ; it has already established in the organisation and structure of industry and society the institutions which make them a reality. The socialised industries offer work for all and work that is of social importance, not merely the making of goods for sale. Social legislation guarantees individual rights. Education, elementary and higher, with the opportunity of every young person to qualify for any kind of occupation, opens wide the door of opportunity. The foundation of ethics is in the Soviet Constitution, and the foundation of the Constitution is in the constructive achievements of twenty-five years of Soviet power.

On the one hand, in our civilisation, we find the preaching of the value of the individual, and of the superiority of spiritual to material values in a society divided into those who "lay up for themselves riches on earth" and those who cannot even begin to think about spiritual values because they are out of work, or poorly housed, or work long hours or are badly paid. On the other hand, in Soviet Society, we have the positive

achievement of the indispensable conditions of spirituality, that mastery of the material, economic basis of life which sets men free to pursue higher things. That is why in Russia we witness the disappearance of that canting mammonism that takes away men's spiritual life even as it reduces them to wage slavery, preaching virtue the while. This very mastery of the material basis has provided the soil in which the rich culture of modern Russia flowers, with its books and plays and music and films, its joy in the richness of life, its comradeship, its great scientific achievements, its bringing to the common stock of the cultural riches of all its many peoples. It is summed up in a motto I once saw over the entrance to a Trade Union Club :

"To live without work is robbery.  
To work without art is barbarism."

This is not the ethics of rigid moral principles which stand over us unaltered through the centuries. The Soviet rejection of such moral absolutes is often laid to their charge as the rejection of morality. Soviet philosophy replies simply that such principles owed their origin not to their Divine source but because they once expressed the concrete needs of some social class rising to power. Freedom and Liberty were the watchwords of the rising bourgeoisie. They have a narrower and a wider significance. As the fixed principles of capitalism, they protect the rights of property and obstruct the emancipation of the workers, and that is why they cannot be allowed to over-ride the only ultimately sacred thing in life, the welfare of humanity. Their wider range presents their narrow champions with the paradox of the social system they defend making the realisation of these ideals impossible. In the name of "freedom" freedom is made impossible. To attain freedom for all, freedom for the exploiter to exploit must go. That violates a sacred principle. That is why Soviet morals overthrow all sectional moral standards and deny their validity. Over everything, that the human needs of all may be satisfied, it puts the *emancipation* of man, and it sees that as the accomplishment and preservation of the revolution. Only in a Socialist Society does true virtue at last become possible.

## PHILOSOPHY AND THE COMMUNIST PARTY

In every country and in every age there are leading elements. The question is who they are and *how* they lead. If they are the representatives of a ruling class they can cajole and bamboozle the public, as too often happens in democratic states in the western model, they can rule authoritatively as in the past and as under Fascism. But the very philosophy of the Soviet State requires more than an *élite* if it is to accomplish its political objectives. A state which removes the last governing class must show those who have hitherto been ruled from above how to become rulers themselves, since there is no privileged class left to take the responsibility.

A revolution which can only be brought about by infusing the working masses with a sense of its historic mission, by their conscious political action, requires that they shall be guided by clearly held ideas. Stalin speaks of "the tremendous role of new social ideas .... The new ideas organise and mobilise the masses .... The spontaneous process of development yields place to the conscious actions of men."

Such understanding once aroused cannot be put to sleep. There is no desire in Russia to put it to sleep. The Communist Party needs the same intelligent understanding and voluntary co-operation to build Socialism as it required for the revolution—and much more. That is why Lenin says, "It is not enough to preach democracy, it is not enough to proclaim and decree it, it is not enough to entrust its realisation to 'representatives' of the people, in representative institutions. One must build democracy from the bottom, on the initiative of the masses themselves, with their active participation in the whole life of the state without supervision from above, without officialdom."<sup>1</sup>

That is why Zhdanov, one of Stalin's closest associates, says: "What we build cannot be built with passive people." Socialism even more than our form of democracy demands the whole-souled co-operation of the masses. Not alone opposition but even indifference is fatal to it.

<sup>1</sup> Lenin, *Collected Works*, Volume XX, Book 1, p.221

But this understanding and "whole-souled co-operation" cannot be obtained by mere appeals to the undifferentiated mass of the working class and peasantry. The best elements of both, the vanguard, must organise itself into a party (not by any means an ordinary political party), to work in all the mass organisations, such as Trade Unions, town and village councils, co-operative societies, and see to it that the understanding, united and enthusiastic support of each organisation is given to the tasks before them. The moment such a party seeks to coerce, or loses the confidence of the masses, or ceases to heed their voice, its power vanishes and it becomes impotent. As long as it really convinces them, and helps them to realise by their own experience the correctness of the practical policies advocated, so long will the advance to socialism continue. If it bases its authority on prestige and unrestricted rights, if it fails to acknowledge and correct its mistakes, if it tries to move too far ahead of the understanding of the people, finally, if it fails to respect people as people, it will fail and deserve to fail. "The history of our Party," says Stalin soberly, "provides a number of such cases," but in the main it has performed its task correctly, and with the devotion, perseverance, self-sacrifice and heroism without which such responsibilities cannot be faced. If Communists are to lead in this way *they must be philosophers*, that is to say they must thoroughly understand the theory of social development, the laws of change—the whole methodology of social science, of dialectical thinking, which we have outlined. They must know it moreover as a *working theory*; they must have consistently applied it and learnt it in action, just as a doctor must dissect, must walk a hospital, must practise, just as someone learning to swim must get into the water. Beatrice and Sidney Webb describe the Party "As a united confraternity, a widely spread companionship, a highly disciplined order, professing a distinct and dogmatic political creed, and charged with a particular vocation, rather than a political party" <sup>1</sup>. But if this is the character of the Party and its work, it follows that the masses have from the first been educated to know and

1. Beatrice and Sidney Webb: *Soviet Communism*

think, told repeatedly to shoulder responsibility, encouraged to criticise and actively participate in government. The most advanced, indeed, are themselves continually passing into the Party which grows continually as the political level of the masses rises.

No people so consistently instructed in using their own heads and so continuously exercised in their trade unions and co-operatives and governing institutions in shouldering responsibility, could ever be merely ordered about. If that was the idea, they should have been taught the exact opposite to everything they have ever learnt, as they would have been in Germany; they should have kept from them any opportunity whatever of getting the feel of governing by the practice of democracy. As it is, their leaders are continually seeking to elevate the rank and file to their own level, to give them responsibilities, to make philosophers of them too, continually teaching them Marxism, science, politics. The philosophy of the Soviet State is being systematically spread among the people through their schools and colleges, through the Young Communist League, through Trade Union classes and through every kind of adult education.

It is taught as every other science is taught, as the law of objective reality, not as idealism would be taught, as a system of *ideas*. It is taught as something continually verifiable in action and not to be understood at all except in action. That is why Lenin says: "We do not want anything to be accepted with the eyes shut, to be an article of faith. Everyone should keep his head tight on his own shoulders, and think out and verify everything for himself."

### HUMANISM

When J. B. Priestley recently visited Russia, it was this wide dissemination of a new philosophy of life which consisted of convictions, not half-beliefs, which so impressed him. He saw that nothing less than this could have inspired the new spirit of co-operation, the willingness to live and die for socialism. He testifies to his conviction that "at the root of this revolution is a deep drive of emotion, an intense feeling of fraternity, a conviction that men are brothers." He goes on to refute

the preposterous idea that the Soviet people are being driven like sheep along the road to Socialism. "The most ruthless discipline in the world," he says, "cannot compel people to make such sacrifices unless people are ready and willing to sacrifice themselves. People cannot be bullied into long spells of sheer devotion and heroism."<sup>1</sup>

We must conclude that there has never been a philosophy which was shared by so many people, and, even more important, which has quickened the understanding and faith of so many people, developing and strengthening their personalities, enhancing their sense of human dignity. In other words the philosophy of the Soviet State is a democratic philosophy, a philosophy of the people, applied throughout their everyday lives *by* the people, and essentially a philosophy *for* the people, for the enlargement of their rights and their lives, of their personalities and their welfare. "I call revolution," said Marx, "the conversion of all hearts and the raising of all hands in behalf of the honour of the free man."

It is because the leading members of the Soviet Commonwealth are imbued with a philosophy which leads them *to respect and care for people* that they have succeeded in their great task. They owe much in this finely human attitude to Stalin, whose deep wisdom and broad humanity has long inspired the Party, as it now inspires the State of which he is the leader. His philosophy and the whole philosophy of the Soviet State is well summed up in his own moving declaration of the supreme value of human personality. "Our leaders," he says, "should display the most solicitous attitude towards our workers, 'little' and 'big,' no matter in what sphere they are engaged, cultivating them assiduously, assisting them when they need support, encouraging them when they display their first successes, advancing them and so forth.... We must learn to value people, to value every worker capable of benefiting our common cause. It is time to realise that of all the valuable capital the world possesses, the most valuable and most decisive is people."<sup>2</sup>

1 This loyalty and devotion was never obtained under Nazism. "Where were the Leningrads and Stalingrads of Germany when Hitler's iron empire was invaded?" says Priestley.

2 Stalin, *Address to the Graduates from the Red Army Academy* (1935)

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